

BOOK REVIEWS

DECEPTION AND SELF-DECEPTION: INVESTIGATING PSYCHICS by Richard Wiseman. Prometheus Books, Amherst, New York, 1997. 266 pp. £22.00 (hardback).

When he was ten years old Richard Wiseman fell for a simple magic trick and his life was never the same again. By the age of eighteen he was a member of the prestigious Magic Circle and working as a professional magician. Gradually his interest in human behaviour, and human deception, led him to take a degree in psychology, and he finally joined the team at Edinburgh University, working for a PhD in parapsychology with Professor Bob Morris. Members of the SPR will know Richard from his many contributions to the *Journal*, his lectures, and his lively presentations at our conferences.

Deception and Self-Deception is a collection of Dr Wiseman's papers published over the years in *The Psychologist*, the *European Journal of Parapsychology*, and (the vast majority) in the *Journal of the SPR*. Together the papers cover most of Wiseman's work on deception and the paranormal.

The first two chapters are the most general. They deal with con games and conjuring, as well as psychic fraud. Wiseman explains why a thorough understanding of psychic fraud is important for anyone who wishes to assess psychic claims or to study psychics, and he describes many of the techniques used in psychic fraud. Clever fraudsters can easily misframe the situation, for example by making themselves seem to be incapable of fraud, by appearing to have no motivation for fraud, or to be unwilling to deceive. They may create highly believable claims—the most effective being claims that the researcher wants to believe in. And they may make normal explanations very difficult by shifting claims, using different methods to produce what appears to be the same effect, by exploiting the researcher's assumptions about the ways in which trickery works, or by exploiting any loopholes in the controls applied. Finally they can, like any good magician, have 'outs' ready in case things go wrong, or fall back on the notorious elusiveness of psychic phenomena. The clear descriptions of the stratagems of psychic fraud should be of value to any researcher testing psychic claimants, or indeed to any potential fraudulent 'psychic'.

Later chapters cover laboratory experiments and investigations of individual cases—starting with the notorious Feilding Report. Readers of the *Journal* will need no introduction to the Feilding report. Indeed arguments about the genuineness of Eusapia Palladino's psychic abilities, and the light cast on them by that original 1909 report, are still going on in the pages of the *Journal*.

Wiseman's paper was published in 1992. He outlined the report and the claims for Eusapia's physical phenomena, reviewed the various normal explanations provided at the time, and argued that one of them had been too easily dismissed—that is, the theory that Eusapia had an accomplice within her cabinet, who gained access through a trap door, or a special panel in an ordinary door. He argues that this possibility was not ruled out by the controls used at the time and that it can account for all the phenomena, including

objects moving and levitating, hands appearing from the 'cabinet' in the corner of the room, and the sitters feeling touches and breezes.

But what about the other side of the story? A footnote in the book informs the reader that Wiseman's paper was controversial at the time of publication and gives references to the responses—but readers of the *SPR Journal* may consider this something of an understatement given the vehemence of those responses. Mary Rose Barrington described Wiseman's suggestions as "improbable and absurd" and he responded by accusing her of making ten major errors—which she then refuted. David Fontana described Wiseman as a "determined critic" making impractical assumptions, and was accused by the latter of nine major errors and of fundamentally misunderstanding the argument. Fontana responded that the errors were "Wiseman's own" and accused him in turn of serious distortion and misrepresentation. None of this appears in the book and, I imagine, most readers will not bother to pursue the references in the footnote and so will not know just how much disagreement followed Wiseman's paper.

This raises a general question for a book of this type—how fair is it to provide just one side of the story? Obviously this is a book of Wiseman's own papers, and therefore it would be inappropriate to include papers by other people—yet for anyone who is seriously interested in the Feilding report, this is just what is needed. One possibility might have been for Wiseman to provide a simple summary of the arguments, to provide a context for his own work. This is not done, and in fact the situation is made even worse than it need have been. The information about the other papers is not clearly set out, but is relegated to a footnote, printed in rather confusing continuous type and spread over two pages.

This relates to what I consider a serious problem with the whole book, in the way it has been edited and produced. The papers are not reprinted in their entirety, as one might expect. First, the original abstracts are removed, which makes the papers much less useful. Second, instead of the original reference lists, with authors in alphabetical order, the references are changed to end-notes, making it far harder to find them. Also, there is no general list of references or a bibliography, which would have made the book a useful general resource for references on deception and the paranormal—nor is there an index. These omissions seriously reduce the value of this book for any serious researcher—and surely the book is intended for serious researchers at least as much as for the general reader—probably more.

These serious problems do not, however, detract from the fact that there are some really excellent papers in the book. I particularly enjoyed the experiment on psychic detection reported by Wiseman, Donald West and Roy Stemman. Three well-known British psychic detectives were compared with a control group of three students who claimed no psychic powers at all. All six were given three objects to handle, each of which had been involved in a solved crime. Then they were asked to describe the crime and to select from a series of statements those that matched the crime in question. The students did just as well as the 'psychic detectives', and none of them did better than chance. The 'psychics' made far more comments about the objects, but were no more accurate than the students were. I like this experiment because it directly

tests a typical psychic claim and shows the claim to be false. Surely if these 'psychic detectives' really had the powers they claim then the objects they were encouraged to handle should have given them at least a few clues about the crimes that we know had been committed. But they did not. Another fascinating story involves Wiseman's investigations into the claims of miracles by Indian godmen. For example, Sri Sathya Sai Baba has over 20 million devotees, worldwide. He routinely 'materializes' holy ash and produces small trinkets out of nowhere—sometimes he even 'materializes' valuable objects made of gold or other precious materials. Though frequently suspected of fraud, he has never been directly caught cheating.

In 1992 an Indian newspaper claimed to have film footage showing Sai Baba using trickery when he apparently materialized a gold watch and gave it to the Prime Minister. Opponents of Sai Baba were delighted at the exposé and the story spread, even to *The Independent* newspaper, which said that the film showed "tawdry sleight-of-hand". Wiseman and Erlendur Haraldsson showed that the truth was not so simple. The film was poor quality and reveals only enough detail to conclude that trickery could have occurred—not that it definitely did.

Obviously, better observations and controlled studies are needed, and Wiseman reports several in which he and Haraldsson tried to track down other godmen and women and get them to produce the holy ash inside a plastic bag, or when filmed by magicians. Their travels make fascinating reading though they did not return with convincing film of either miracles or fraud. In all these examples Wiseman is wisely cautious in his conclusions. His investigations reveal the difficulty of getting unambiguous evidence of psychic fraud and the importance of designing experiments carefully and with respect for the needs of the claimants.

There are many other interesting papers in this book, including tests of the SORRAT claims, experimental investigations into séance-room phenomena, and studies of what people recall after pseudopsychic demonstrations. In spite of its shortcomings *Deception and Self-Deception* is an interesting and useful collection.

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URI GELLER: MAGICIAN OR MYSTIC? by Jonathan Margolis. Orion Media, The Orion Publishing Group Ltd., 1998. 296pp. £18.99 (hardback).

We all knew about Uri Geller, didn't we? Who could have escaped the mangled cutlery, the publicity hype, the wild claims, the counterclaims (with good old James Randi growling in the sceptic undergrowth of the psi jungle), and the seemingly endless court cases? What was the man behind it all like, though? Alas, it seems that the brashness and loud noises are all that there is of Geller; the man and the 'phenomenon' are one.

Jonathan Margolis has worked very hard and done a most conscientious job with this biography. It ranges through Geller's unsettled early childhood, a 'light' which stunned him in a Tel Aviv garden (this is possibly his first UFO